DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 327 858 CS 212 627

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TITLE Exploring Mental Illness through a Poetry Writing Assignment.
PUB DATE Aug 90
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (98th, Boston, MA, August 10-14, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Content Area Writing; Higher Education; *Mental Disorders; *Poetry; *Psychology; Student Reaction; Writing Across the Curriculum; *Writing Assignments
IDENTIFIERS Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

An atypical and challenging writing assignment for courses in general or abnormal psychology is to ask the students to write a poem about the experience of mental illness. The format, length, and topic are left entirely up to the student. While shocked at first, students rose to the challenge after being told they would be judged on content and not on format or poetic language. Most of the resulting poems were creative and interesting. The best poems were posted on a bulletin board in the psychology building. The display proved popular with faculty and students, to the delight of the student authors. (RS)

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Exploring Mental Illness Through a Poetry Writing Assignment

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Poster presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, Boston, MA, August 1990.

Running head: EXPLORING MENTAL ILLNESS

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Exploring Mental Illness Through a Poetry Writing Assignment

Encouraging creative thinking and enhancing writing skills are important goals of teachers at all levels. In recent years, Teaching of Psychology has carried a number of articles on how to incorporate writing assignments into psychology courses (e.g., Beers, 1985; Bennett, 1985; Chrisler, 1990; Klough, 1983; 1990 special issue on writing). This poster illustrates an atypical and challenging writing assignment for courses in general or abnormal psychology.

The aim of this assignment is to increase students' understanding of mental illness and their empathy toward the mentally ill. The idea arose as I was trying to think of a way to encourage students to identify with those who have psychological problems. I wanted a short writing assignment in which students could reflect on what it might be like to experience mental illness. Poetry, with its emotional base, vivid imagery, and often fragmented language, seemed ideal.

Students are told two weeks before the assignment is due that they are to write a poem about the experience of mental illness. The format, length, and topic are left entirely up to them. They may choose to

be concrete or abstract and may describe the experience using first or third person pronouns. Anything goes!

The class generally seems shocked when they are told about the assignment, but after being assured that they will be judged on content, not format and poetic language, they usually rise to the challenge. One can count on receiving several haiku because length is unimportant. Someone will always hand in "Roses are red; violets are blue. I'm schizophrenic and so am I." However, most take the assignment quite seriously and turn in work that shows that they have thought long and carefully about their topics. Most work is creative and interesting; some poems are so beautifully written that I refer them to the college literary magazine.

Last year (after obtaining permission from the students) I posted the best work on a bulletin board in the psychology building. The display proved to be very popular with students and faculty to the delight of the authors. This poster consists primarily of poems from last year's class to illustrate the kind of work this assignment can produce. Readers will be able to judge for themselves the value of the assignment.

References

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